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Macron Looks East

The French president's visit to the Baltics offers an opportunity for closer coordination with Germany on Russia policy



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Part of French President Emmanuel Macron's European policy is to improve the position of his country in the Eastern European member states of the European Union. Although this is not a change of strategy, but only a new method, it creates favorable conditions for intensified Franco-German dialogue on European strategic issues.

France's interest in the EU's Eastern European countries is traditionally shared by Germany; the wish to develop relations with all European partners echoes the German commitment to EU cohesion. More specifically, a series of recent French foreign policy initiatives described below should be used to deepen the dialogue between Paris and Berlin on Russia policy and on the EU's Eastern neighborhood, which is undergoing major upheavals. These are also vital security issues for the Baltic countries visited by the French president earlier this week.

Macron's visit to Lithuania and Latvia, September 28–30, 2020, highlighted both the potential and the limits of the French attempt to in-

crease its presence and influence in the EU's East. The fact that he visited two of the main skeptics in the EU towards his Russia policy at a time when EU relations with Moscow are most strained not only allowed him to clarify his approach. The topics addressed and the scenography are also revealing of his expectations and his agenda concerning the strategic autonomy of the European Union. Finally, Macron followed the "at the same time" method that has become the hallmark of his politics – and the source of many misunderstandings at home and abroad. In other words, he regularly adopts a priori contrary positions and in doing so claims to be synthesizing, while his opponents reproach him for a vague political positioning.

BOTH SOUTH AND EAST?

First of all, this French president – in contrast to his predecessors – is committed to speaking to all the member states of the Union, and not only to the bigger states or to France's traditional partners like Germany or Italy.

Central Europe and the Baltic states have long been the forgotten areas of French diplomacy and it had been almost 20 years since a French president had visited the Baltic region (the last French leader to do so was Jacques Chirac in 2001 before they became EU member states).

Macron is now trying to fill this gap and to engage in both the EU's South and East in order to push forward his agenda on European sovereignty. This consists of developing European capabilities, not only in the field of defense, but also in strategic areas such as energy and digital technology; the objective is to make the EU an autonomous actor, thus limiting as much as possible its dependence on China and the United States in particular. In this respect, the French president emphasized the convergence of interests on specific topics, such as the fight against cybercrime and disinformation, which represent a sensitive subject in both Baltic states.

France's commitment to Baltic security also strengthens Germany's security guarantee to this region

That said, France has neither the same network with nor the same geographic proximity to the East as it does with the South, and the diplomatic and political work of conviction and of influence is more challenging there. Moreover, the search for convergence

in traditionally forgotten countries does not automatically mean a strong, long-term involvement of France in the region, or new comprehensive alliances.

BOTH EU'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND NATO FOR BALTIC DEFENSE?

On some topics related to strategic autonomy, a gap separates France from the Baltic countries. This is particularly the case when it comes to defense issues. While the security of the Baltic states is guaranteed primarily by NATO and the United States, in Vilnius the French president called for the development of autonomous European capabilities for the production of defense equipment. Against the backdrop of shifting US foreign policy objectives, Macron's aim was to encourage the Baltic leaders to think pragmatically about their future options. In parallel to NATO, Paris would like to see them also more involved in European defense structures – such as the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), instigated by France and created in late 2018. As a matter of fact, the EI2 founding members included Estonia, the Baltic country not visited by Macron during his tour, which already cooperates with the French military and security apparatus through its developed cyber capabilities.

Regarding the strategic autonomy of the EU, Macron's visit to Lithuania and Latvia was also an opportunity to clarify his position on NATO. His much-commented sentence on its brain death, in an interview with *The Economist* in November 2019, had worried in particular countries dependent on transatlantic defense structures, such as the Baltic states. Therefore, (re)building confidence involves reassuring them that France remains present and committed to their security, as well as to NATO structures. This is the signal Macron wanted to send by visiting the French

contingent serving as part of a multinational NATO battlegroup in the Lithuanian town of Rukla. The battlegroup is part of the Alliance's "Enhanced Forward Presence," which forms part of its collective defense posture on its eastern flank.

Macron's demands to the Europeans, including the Baltic countries, are twofold: The first is to be more self-confident and strategic within NATO; the second is to develop a European defense policy and thus reduce dependence on the Americans. The emphasis here is on complementarity and progressiveness. From the French point of view, the new instruments and formats to be developed by the Europeans must not compete with NATO but contribute to it indirectly. In other words, the European pillar of the Alliance should gradually be strengthened and allow Europe to act in the future, in some cases and if necessary, without the United States. This demand is driven by the conviction that the American disinterest in Europe will continue well beyond the presidency of Donald Trump and that transatlantic relations are undergoing deep and lasting change.

BOTH DETERMINATION AND DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA

Still, most attention during Macron's Baltic tour was focused on his Russia policy announced a year ago without any consultations with European partners, which caused irritation in many EU capitals, including Berlin.

As he expressed it in his speech to the French ambassadors in mid-2019, President Macron was seeking a balanced position in relations with Russia: between strategic dialogue and firmness. On the one hand, he takes a hard line against President Vladimir Putin and calls out Russia's destructive attitude toward the West. On the other hand, he offers Moscow

cooperation in selected areas of common interest, such as arms control, cybersecurity, and space research. He also hopes that Moscow might adopt a more constructive attitude in crisis regions such as Syria and the Sahel zone, which are of strategic relevance to France's foreign and security policy and where Russia could potentially cause destabilization.

Macron's plan was to end Russia's isolation and alienation from Europe, and to limit its slide into China's embrace. Talking to Moscow on a bilateral level was seen as a better means to achieve this goal than not talking at all, or waiting for a shift in the EU common position.

However, a series of recent events, including the deterioration of EU's relations with Russia after the attempted murder of opposition leader Alexei Navalny seemed to make Macron's approach increasingly untenable. After the Merkel-Macron talks in Brégançon on August 20, because of the poisoning of Navalny and of Russian support for Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko, Paris called off a meeting of French and Russian foreign and defense ministers scheduled for mid-September, along with technical discussions in 14 bilateral working groups. The official statement from Moscow claimed that the new date for these bilateral meetings will be considered once conditions improve.

In these circumstances, President Macron's visit to the Baltic countries was accompanied by a central question: Does he still believe in strategic dialogue with the Kremlin?

In Vilnius, the French president defended his long-term approach of engaging Moscow on a structured security dialogue: "Our vision is that if we want to build a lasting peace on the continent we have to work with Russia," he said. In talks with the Baltic leaders, the Elysée wanted to discuss not only Baltic sensitivities vis-à-vis Russia but also the best way for-

ward – "taking not only their interests but the European interests" into consideration, according to *Politico*. In other words, what has changed is not the substance of Macron's approach to Russia but rather his tactics and sequencing, now adapted to the new realities of EU politics and relations with Moscow.

Moreover, to improve engagement with his skeptical Baltic hosts, the French president was willing to send a strong message in support of mass protests in neighboring Belarus. Ahead of his trip, he told the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper that "it's clear that Lukashenko must go." During his visit to Vilnius, he met with the exiled Belarussian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who challenged President Lukashenko in the fraudulent elections in August. She said that Macron promised her that he would push for a more active EU role in the Belarus political crisis, and help secure the release of the political prisoners. She was also invited to deliver a speech in the French parliament. These moves pleased the Balts and allowed Macron to develop a new element in his proposed dialogue: an offer to mediate between the Belarussian opposition and Russian President Putin.

Macron promptly initiated a call to Putin on September 30, telling him that Tsikhanouskaya was open for dialogue with Russia and 'encouraged President Putin to take it into consideration', according to the Elysée. In its readout of this call, the Kremlin said that Putin cautioned the French President against "any external attempts at interference or pressure on the legitimate state authorities" in Belarus. Both leaders agreed that the best way forward was to resort to mediation by the OSCE – something that Minsk has been refusing to accept.

GOOD MESSAGE FOR GERMANY AND EU COHESION

In two main aspects, Emmanuel Macron's message to the Baltic states will also be welcome in Berlin and points to favorable conditions for Franco-German cooperation. Firstly, his determination to talk and to listen to all European partners, including the Baltic countries, echoes the German commitment to guarantee the *Zusammenhalt* (cohesion) of the EU. More specifically, France's commitment to Baltic security also strengthens Germany's security guarantee to this region. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, Berlin made a strategic commitment to Baltic security and assumed a large role in reinforcing NATO's collective defense there, including as a lead nation of the NATO battlegroup in Lithuania.

Secondly, the French willingness to use the current pause in the strategic dialogue with Moscow to consult with EU partners, while being intransigent on respect for human rights and multilateral rules, is a chance to intensify Franco-German dialogue. There is no longer any realistic prospect of reducing EU sanctions on Russia. On the contrary, Moscow's willingness to compromise over the conflict in eastern Ukraine is even more unlikely than before.

There is a need to reconsider a combination of incentives and pressure that can together alter the Kremlin's behavior and calculus on issues that matter the most to Europeans. And as long as Berlin and Paris have no real coordinated Russia policy, Moscow will always be able to play one off against the other. Without a new coordinated approach, the French bilateral dialogue with Moscow will be used by the Russian leadership to improve its own negotiating position on European security – and to sow more discord among Europeans. Regardless of how many times President Macron talks to Eastern Europeans.

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